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Biz (left), Chafik and Batlam of Loco Locass: They play tonight at Metropolis, and Biz says his aim is to "have at least 10 anglophones" at the show.

PIERRE OBENDRAUF THE GAZETTE

LOCASS Sovereignty in their souls, but still seeking its hymn

CONTINUED FROM D1

With Libérez-nous des libéraux, the trio created a popular anthem, but so far the tune that fully expresses their deep personal and political feelings about Quebec is elusive

On the couch next to a Renaissance art volume is a 1967 textbook from the local library on the French-English battles at les Plaines d'Abraham, written before the independence movement had taken hold. "Fascinating, the way they wrote about it then, what they taught in schools," ventures Biz.

You can see the differences between the three personalities in Loco Locass from the word go. (Allons-y?) Biz – in long, leaky thick black hair (he takes off his navy-blue toque quickly), with lamplighter eyes set above high cheekbones – is the most intense, the quickest off the hip and lip. Batlam (an actor by trade) is more poetic, inquisitive, sensitive, patient, with a far-off, almost mystic look. Chafik is the musical head with the spirit-fed, his round face at once shy and outspoken, troubled by the inability to write a positive song about independence. Libérez-nous des libéraux was a huge political anthem that gained province-wide support, but where do they go from there?

They get into it for what must be the thousandth time ...

Chafik: It's the challenge of writing a sovereignist song that doesn't necessarily speak for a sovereignist party, a song that's positive on its own. People are less au courant than we think about where to go.

Biz: We haven't written that hymn yet ... We've already complained a lot about les mauvais libéraux, mauvais américains, mauvais tout ... Where do you go? Not the kind of cheesy fleur-de-lys patriotism of the 1970s?

Batlam: The question isn't reductionist. The question of a people being free is an enormous, magnificent idea that (should be) based on our best sentiments ...

Biz: I prefer to compare our little battle in context with those around the world. Hey, we're rooting for you! So why aren't we able to do it ourselves?

JR: Regarding indépendantistes, I've always wondered, was there a turning point when you embraced the movement or were you more or less raised on it?

Batlam: I'm asked that a lot on tour. Certainly my parents played a determining role. I was 8 when the first 1980 referendum took place, and it was a huge political event for me at that age. There is a kind of a priori sovereignist spirit within me, but I don't know when it was born. Perhaps you live through little moments in life where you draw conclusions on what's going on ...

Biz: Normally when you get to 15, 16 you often think the opposite of what your parents think, you want a viewpoint that belongs to you. It's like asking an American, "When did you start being American?" It's the place you're born and the cultural environment that determines who you are, and also your family ... 1980 was the first time I confronted politics in a conscientious manner. You're directly involved at age 8, you have no choice but to see those around you. Oui ou non. I asked my mother what was going on, who was against separation, and she said the anglophones and the rich. I was 8, and that has certainly been the case, even now. I remember my history class in secondaire, the whole lesson seemed to lead to the inevitability of separation.

Batlam: I think there's a deep emotional side of the question that doesn't belong to the world of ideas, but to the heart. You can say that you don't agree with sovereignty, but you understand why it's always going to be there.

Chafik: You're born into a religion, baptized in a certain way; you don't ask questions. But then there are arguments against (indépendance) that are still intelligent ... I have a tendency to rationalize a lot of things. It's like when we started Loco Locass, I came to the conclusion that cultural diversity was good for the planet and also for Quebec sovereignty and for everyone else, including Canada ... I understand there are other people who think differently than I do, and that enriches me ... I like my friends for their strong personalities, different from my own.

Biz: When you're a teen you're faced with choices about religion and nationhood – whether to continue as is, to continue a little differently from your parents but not substantially, or to break completely – je flush tout ça – and go the complete opposite direction ... The FLQ saw it as a class war, that we're an oppressed economic class ... But society has changed. Since I've lived in Montreal the last 10 years, the only English I know are très cool, certainly not our enemies – they're allies.

JR: The latest conventional wisdom is that indépendance is dead, an old issue, etcetera ...

Biz: They said that 10 years ago ... Even Trudeau said that, before he entered politics ... You know when it's going to be finished? When it's finally done.

JR: And when will that be?

Biz: Between 10 and 20 years, but who knows? It's normal, it's generational, the young don't have hang-ups about being Québécoise(s). ... There's a difference between the idea of indépendance and its messengers.

Batlam: You can't say the idea is dead because the leader is bad.

Biz: But in the public's view the leader is a product of the doctrine ... I mean, Canada doesn't exactly offer us any inspiring leaders ... I wonder how René (Lévesque) would do today, but it wasn't René who convinced me of the idea ...

JR: Your show at the Metropolis is the last in Montreal this summer, before you start the next record. Any surprises?

Biz: My aim is to have at least 10 anglophones at Le Métropolis! ... Les deux solitudes still exist a bit, and I know that when I stick my fleur-de-lys in your face it's not always pleasant. But why does liberty and a social democratic world view work for everyone else except les québécois? (Said with sarcasm)

I get on the métro and people say, "Hi, how's it going?" I pass Berri, it's the same thing, but after McGill until Angrignon, I'm invisible! It's the feeling of being anonymous in another country. It's amazing, to see people who have no idea who we are, what we listen to, what we watch ... Hey, the government of Quebec is your government, right? Well, we're all part of it, tabernac!

Chafik: It's getting better among some people, but largely anglos don't listen to francophone music. Is there some kind of block?

JR: Seems so, because just about all anglos include some kind of world-music in their musical diet, in otherwise incomprehensible languages. You would think French would come more naturally to anglos here than elsewhere. Then again, many anglos still seethe over sign laws.

Biz: All we wanted was that French exists in commercial signage downtown. Of course Mordecai Richler is right when he says it's a theatre of the absurd to have people measuring signs ... But what I find even more absurd is a minority that refuses to integrate itself even minimally in the culture – that I find completely absurd!

Batlam: But Richler was a product of la rue St. Urbain during the war years, right? I've read books and essays on this somewhat difficult relationship between the Jews and Québécois.

Biz: ... Yes, we cannot forget Adrien Arcand's brownshirts, but there were many equivalents around the world. Bill 101 was mainly the fault of les vieux anglais, because maybe if you had a little good will in the West Island ... there would be fewer inspectors bothering bartenders over a Guinness bottle that says beer instead of bière, which is completely absurd. But on the other hand, I don't know how a 15-year-old from the West Island cannot like Malajube. I mean, none of us can understand the words!

Chafik: It fractures me when someone with a Québécois accent decides to sing in English or adopt a French accent. As a question of survival, Quebec supports its artists more because the anglos are more likely to assimilate into the American culture. For whatever reason, we're still not totally assimilated. There's a growing pride in culture that's even more important than politics.

Biz: The Québécois culture and language in the context of North America is like a quasi religion for me, with the rights of others always in mind. My language orchestrates my life. It's there every day, it informs my way of looking at the world. What I regret among anglos is what the Hindus or Muslims reproach us for – the inability to put ourselves in their shoes. I understand why everyone around the world speaks English, fine, but you can't understand Quebec unless you can step into language on the street. It's more than just Budweiser, rue Crescent and Grand Prix."

Loco Locass plays Metropolis, 59 Ste. Catherine St. E., tonight at 9. Tickets are $20.50 at the main Spectrum box office and through Ticketpro, www.ticketpro.ca or (514) 908-9090. Chafik plays the DJ set at Le Shag (Savoy at Metropolis) on Thursday, June 15 starting at midnight. Free, on first-come basis.

> "What I find ... absurd is a minority that refuses to integrate itself even minimally in the culture."
> Biz

Their homage to an icon will be a closing-night surprise

Moufle – who has created the Francofolies' closing-night tribute to famed 1950s and '60s songwriter Raymond Lévesque to which she's invited Loco Locass – knows a thing or two about innovation in Quebec chanson, having worked closely with then-chum Robert Charlebois in the 1960s and early '70s. She's a Loco Locass "inconditionelle," which is why she asked them for a surprise homage to Lévesque, author of the hymn-like Quand les hommes vivront d'amour.

"They manipulate the language and words very well, and they have a lot of culture. Others can get very superficial in these matters, but they're on very firm footing. I always vote oui, but I'm not as nationalist as they are. But that's normal – they're younger than I am!"

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

CP/ILE PHOTO

Raymond Lévesque: de l'amour.

Toute la gang includes four more gars

While Loco Locass love to scratch and sample, they also travel with four musicians who play live music that evolves, says Chafik, the rap trio's musical director. Indeed, this band is a who's who of Montreal music:

Jean-Philippe "Djip" Pelletier, bassist from the beginning (in Quebec City in 1995). Also a member of techno/D&B group Hétatouye.

Jean-Sébastien "Jeanse" Nicol joined the group at les Francouvertes at the end of 2000 at the request of Djip. Profiled in Modern Drummer, he's played with Marc Déry, les Frères Diouf and La Ligue d'Impro Musicale de Montréal.

Greg "Lester G" Smith, new guitarist from Ontario who speaks French very well, merci. This Pete Townshend freak plays with Sans Pression, Shades of Culture, Obscure Disorder, Atach Tatuq, Jah Cutta, Adam Shaki, DaZoque! (Norman Nawrocki) ... and also mixed many of the songs on LL's Amour Oral.

Martin "von" Lizotte, keyboardist, member since October 2004, plays with Jean Leloup, Dobacaracol and la Ligue d'Impro.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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